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## Ideology as a Transmitted Disease: the World of Asahan Alham

*L'idéologie comme maladie transmissible : le monde de Asahan Alham*

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Association Archipel

HENRI CHAMBERT-LOIR<sup>1</sup>

## Ideology as a Transmitted Disease: the World of Asahan Alham

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Asahan Alham is an Indonesian writer who has published, under slightly different names, four books defined as belonging to different genres. Those books can be read in different ways according to the prior knowledge (or total ignorance) that one has of the author's biography and according to the objectives and inclinations of each reader. They are books of adventures; some are novels of love (or rather stories of love affairs); they are also documentary sources about various political contexts, in Indonesia, in the USSR, and in Vietnam. The aim of this article is to show that these four books, beyond considerable formal differences, constitute above all the intimate autobiography of a man swept along in the political turmoil of Soekarno's and Soeharto's Indonesia, and that this autobiography is unique with respect to the norms of that genre in Indonesia.

First, the author published under the name of Asahan Alham the "novel" *Perang dan Kembang* (*War and Flowers*, 2001), then under the name of Asahan Aidit the "memoirs novel" *Alhamdulillah* (*Thank God*, 2006), then under the name of Asahan Alham Aidit the "collection of memoirs-short stories" *Cinta, Perang dan Ilusi: Antara Moskow dan Hanoi* (*Love, War and Illusions: Between Moscow and Hanoi*, 2006), and lastly again under the name of Asahan Alham the "novel" or "memoirs" *Azalea: Hidup Mengejar Ijazah* (*Azalea: Living in Search of Diplomas*, 2009).

He had previously published two collections of poetry under the respective names of Asahan Aidit (*Perjalanan dan Rumah Baru*, *Travel and A New*

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*House*, 1993) and Asahan Alham (*23 Sajak Menangisi Viet Tri, 23 Verses to Grieve Viet Tri*, 1998).

The explanation of those various names is simple: The author was born as Asahan Aidit and changed his name to Asahan Alham (abbreviation of *alhamdulillah*, “Thank God”) in 1984, when he settled in the Netherlands. We can see, however, that he kept using his original name long after having chosen a new one.<sup>2</sup>

The four prose works are thus presented as belonging to the following genres: *roman*, *memoar*, *roman memoar*, and *cerpen memoar* (*cerpen* is short story). The categories *roman*, *cerpen*, and *memoar* are well established in Indonesia, but the mixed ones (*roman memoar* and *cerpen memoar*) do not exist. One can immediately guess that they are hybrid genres which can be defined as literary texts (novels and short stories) inspired by the life of the author, or as memoirs mixed with fiction, according to the emphasis one wishes to give to the fictional or the authentic element in them.

The four books have been published by four different publishers: the first (*War and Flowers*) by a known one, Pustaka Jaya, with a print-run of 3,000 copies<sup>3</sup> and the other three by small publishers (Lembaga Sastra Pembebasan, Lembaga Humaniora, and Klik Books respectively) with, in the last three cases, various flaws in printing and presentation, and with probably limited circulations. Reviews have been very few (as is almost always the case in Indonesia) and it is impossible to ascertain what the readership of the books has been. The fact that the books are not commented upon on the Indonesian Goodreads website is an indication that their popularity was very limited.<sup>4</sup> One of them, *Cinta, Perang dan Ilusi*, has been discussed by David T. Hill (“Writing lives in exile”), who mainly reviews the political context of the stories.

It is indeed tempting to look in the four books for a testimony on the events that the author experienced: he was 22 in 1965 and, if those “semi-memoirs” are truthful, he has lived through rather extraordinary adventures in the USSR, in Vietnam, and in the Netherlands. But is that how an Indonesian audience reads them? Asvi Warman Adam read the manuscript of *Alhamdulillah* in

2. According to Asahan Alham himself, it is his publishers who chose among his two names without asking his opinion (pers. comm.). I am extremely grateful to Asahan Alham for his patience and his kindness in answering my numerous and insistant questions throughout 2015. His explanations have been most helpful and his friendly humour most rewarding. My interpretation of his books changed altogether in the course of our correspondance. I don’t exclude, however, the possibility that there may have been elements of fiction in his answers, as this would be consistant with his view on how the past has to be recalled. I also wish to express my heartily thanks to my colleague Ernest Thrimbe for commenting on this article and offering editorial suggestions.

3. I thank Ajip Rosidi for this information and other comments on this novel.

4. The website <[www.goodreads.com/group/bookshelf/345-goodreads-indonesia](http://www.goodreads.com/group/bookshelf/345-goodreads-indonesia)> is entirely devoted to books published in Indonesia and constitutes an excellent source on the way books are received and interpreted.

2000, before its publication, and wondered whether it was a Vietnamese novel translated into Indonesian.<sup>5</sup> This means that he, as a historian specialized in contemporary history and more especially the 1965 events and their aftermath, had seen no Indonesian reality behind the novelistic facade. Even more so, the young Indonesian reader, who knows virtually nothing of those events, is most likely to read the book as mere fiction.

Even more likely to be considered as fiction is *War and Flowers* (*Perang dan Kembang*). This big book (484 pages) is the first written by Asahan Alham: according to the data on the last page, it was written in Nha Trang, Vietnam, in 1983. It is defined (in the blurb written by the publisher) as a “novel”; the title itself suggests a novel. No preface is there to dispute this. The cover illustration is a drawing representing a soldier dreaming about women.<sup>6</sup> What does this fiction tell us?

The narrative starts with the evocation of a threefold exotic setting: Vietnam, war, and the military milieu. The novel starts with the sentence: “This small village that I had recently discovered was a few dozen kilometers away from the capital Hanoi, on a quite high plateau, its hard and reddish paths uncovered by asphalt.”

The protagonist, who also is the narrator (he uses the pronoun “*aku*”), is a Malaysian whose name (once quoted as Abdul Salam bin Baheramsyah Ja’far Fatillah) is abbreviated into Salam; his comrades call him Lam. So, there is identity between protagonist and narrator but not with the author.

For unstated reasons, Salam lives and works in a Vietnamese military base, a few dozen kilometers from Hanoi. He is part of a comedic troupe which travels from one base to another, entertaining soldiers. He has affairs with several local women and he occasionally recalls other affairs with various women. These episodes occupy a very important place; perhaps they are the main subject of the novel.

This “first part” of the novel takes place in 1968. In the second part, three years later, Salam is posted to the navy in Haiphong. New affairs, new memories of affairs, new anecdotes about Vietnam in war. The stay in Haiphong is interrupted by a trip of several months to China, where Salam is the guest of the government, royally treated at first, coldly later, and where he meets one of his brothers. In the third part, after his return to Vietnam, he remains in Haiphong for a while, then is transferred to Hanoi, where he teaches Malay to a small group of apprentice interpreters. When the final victory of Vietnam is imminent, he is told to resume his studies at the university; he works on a dissertation about Southeast Asian tales and proverbs.

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5. See his preface to the book published in 2006.

6. See the reproduction of the covers of the four books at the end of this article.

He defends his dissertation after a few years. War is over, he has no more work, he asks to leave the country, but the Communist Party, in a new change of policy, organizes his wedding with the girl he is in love with. So he seems to be definitively settled in the country.

This action as a whole occupies the years 1968 to 1978, but in a sporadic way. The Vietnamese context is very present: there is no systematic discourse on the country, but the various scenes that are the setting of the novel's action, little by little, build a picture of it: war, population, food, landscapes, festivals... Salam's gaze is always sympathetic; he speaks Vietnamese fluently and could be totally integrated into the local society if the government, or the Party, did not keep him resolutely on the sidelines, notably by forbidding him to find a job by himself and to have a relationship with a local woman. There is no other Malay or Indonesian character in the novel (except one in a flashback episode) and the male Vietnamese ones are very few. Therefore Salam is the almost unique protagonist amidst ten women or so, with all of whom he has a sexual and in some cases sentimental relationship. Those affairs are very short lived (one night or a little more) but four of them are described as representing a profound love.

In the first pages, Aku has an adventure with a young woman, Kim. He marries her at the end of the novel, the last pages of which are devoted to her. The skeleton of the novel is there, in this adventure that marks the beginning and the end, and the very long interval of which (about ten years) is filled by fleeting adventures with eight other women, which in some way give its rhythm to the narrative, marking its stages. Some more or less artificial links between a few of these women, as well as regular new evocations of one or the other, help to underscore that structure.

The women are five Vietnamese and four foreigners. The latter are one Indonesian (Gerda), one Polish (Lena), both belonging to the past, one Chinese (Chiau Sen) and one French (Christine). Aku is not in love with them; they stand outside the love competition; they are only passing through. The Vietnamese, on the contrary, are all potential wives, and it so happens that they are physically eliminated. The first one is discarded in various ways: she belongs to the past (she is featured in the novel in a flashback episode); Aku had not been in love with her; she is a half-foreigner (Vietnamese of Chinese origin); but she is also eliminated in a more radical way: she is killed by the Vietnamese coast-guards whilst trying to flee the country at the same time as hundreds of thousands of "boat-people." The second one, Hai Van, is killed by a bomb shortly after her adventure with Aku. Another one, Mai Lan, is the victim of a concussion from bomb-blast and reduced to a vegetative state. Remains Loan, the only one who is not physically damaged; she exits the love competition because her family arranges her marriage with another man.

Some readers will take exception to a certain complacency for the macho fantasies of the protagonist (or the narrator) or the number of implausibilities,

but other readers on the contrary will enjoy that complacency, those implausibilities, and the casualness of the narrator when eliminating women. Asahan Alham in private denies any implausibility. Do Indonesian readers value verisimilitude?<sup>7</sup>

Thus, from a first reading, we have a dense novel dominated by eroticism and exoticism. However, what is Aku doing in Vietnam in wartime?

In fact, we know the author. The biographical sketch at the front of *War and Flowers*, which is all the more significant as it was written by the author himself,<sup>8</sup> informs us that the author actually is an Indonesian who left Jakarta for Moscow in 1961 to study humanities and obtained a masters degree in 1966. At the end of that year, he left for Vietnam, where he did further studies in various domains: journalism, military matters (*kemiliteran*), Vietnamese language and literature. At Hanoi State University, under the supervision of Professor Vu Ngoc Phan, he wrote, in Vietnamese, a dissertation on a comparative study of some aspects of Vietnamese and Nusantaraian proverbs, which he defended, with honours, in 1978. He lived seventeen years in Vietnam, and then emigrated to the Netherlands, where he adopted Dutch nationality under the family name Alham (from the word *alhamdulillah*).

Everything is clear then: the author is a scholar who made brilliant studies in foreign countries. He learned Russian and Vietnamese, wrote theses in those two languages, obtained a masters degree in Moscow and a PhD in Hanoi. He is a man of letters with multiple interests, who followed teachings not only in philology, but also journalism and military matters. He spent a long time in Vietnam: seventeen years, which suggests that he worked there in his own domain, before moving for uncertain reasons to the Netherlands. This invites us to a second reading, according to which the book could be labelled “*roman memoir*”: it is a story, perhaps partially fictitious, inspired by the personal experience of the author. He did not work in universities but in the army and the navy. The authority of the Vietnamese government over him can be ascribed to his military status.

This is correct, but the biographical sketch is intended to mislead the reader for reasons we will see later. There is a third reading.

The book *Alhamdulillah*, again a big volume of 420 pages excluding the appendices, has a totally different appearance. The cover itself, on which the title *Roman Memoar Alhamdulillah* introduces the idea of veracity, and the

7. In his foreword to the novel *Alhamdulillah* (2006: vi), Asvi Warman Adam writes: “Another of Asahan’s striking strong points is his faculty to depict love scenes. In the book *War and Flowers* the narrator tells several times about his amorous experiences at the beginning of the war. Those evocations don’t seem artificial but authentic.”

8. Except for details, it is identical with the one in *Love*. In personal communication Asahan Alham explains that he wrote it together with A. Kohar Ibrahim, another exile settled in Brussels, where he published journals and books in great numbers.

name of the author, Asahan Aidit, is, for initiates, an historical indication, also contains a family portrait (six men and two children, all standing in two rows) with a no less than nine line caption, informing us that the six men are Abdullah Aidit and his five sons (DN, Murad, Basri, Sobron, and Asahan), while the two children are the eldest daughter and son of DN Aidit. The reader is thus informed: this “*roman memoar*” certainly deals with authentic facts. Moreover, a very short blurb signed by a popular author (Ayu Utami) and forewords by two known intellectuals (Eep Saefulloh Fatah and Asvi Warman Adam) underscore the political dimension of the novel. Lastly, at the end of the book, twenty nine black-and-white pictures that mostly show the author among his family and friends serve as a confirmation: the book deals with reality—but in a novelistic way as the predicate “*roman memoar*” indicates.

This book is written in the first person too, but the pronoun used (“*saya*”) is different from the preceding one. The narrator is, throughout the narrative, alternatively a guest of the Vietnamese Communist Party and a student; in the first case he is called Nguyen van Ai (as an abbreviation of Aidit), in the second, Sulai. There is no character whose temperament is analyzed or even described in any detailed way. Even Tam and Binh (in Nha Trang) or Nga (in Hanoi), who have a relatively intimate relationship with the narrator, remain vague persons. None of the many Vietnamese characters, let alone other Indonesian refugees, has a face or a temperament. This results in an amplification of the narrator’s isolation: he lives in an extravagant, illogical world, where he is alone among phantoms.

Women were many and occupied a large part of the plot in the preceding book; their place here is trivial, and nothing disastrous happens to them. The narrator has short and inconsequential adventures with four women. One, an affair with a young Moroccan woman, while Sulai lives in the Netherlands as a bachelor, has also been told by the author in a very different way in a short story (“Halimah”), which underlines the lability of fiction. Another of the adventures has nothing to do with seduction: the narrator lends himself to the demands of a woman who wishes to become pregnant. In another case, his lover, a Vietnamese interpreter, leaves him following the order of the Party and he feels some pain (“So we parted. As simple as a leaf is loosed from the tree and drifts down lightly to earth. Does earth feel pain? I did,” p. 231). There are, however, no great surges of love and no wedding plans as in the preceding book, neither is there any device of elimination or degradation of the female characters, and this underlines the artificiality of this device in *War and Flowers*.

There are in the narrative a few passages that betray fiction, in particular an unbelievable episode where Sulai is kidnapped by two Russians wearing fake beards who want to assassinate him but are eventually killed by Vietnamese police who also die in the gun fight... But those evidently fictitious passages



are few, and the book gives, on the contrary, the impression—perhaps erroneous—of great veracity.

On another level, however, this book shows more literary elaboration than the two other novels: *War and Flowers* and *Azalea* are built according to a chronologically linear thread, even though the narrator allows himself many flashbacks. *Alhamdulillah*, on the contrary, is conceived according to a complex temporal structure. The first sentence of the narrative (“I left Saigon at dusk.”) locates the beginning of the narration at the time when the protagonist leaves Vietnam definitively for Europe—where he lands on page 329. The major part of the text, that is, the totality of the sojourn in Vietnam, is thus somehow recalled by the narrator at the moment of leaving the country. But this narration is far from being linear: it is divided into two parts, the first of which (the sojourn in Nha Trang) is posterior to the second (the sojourn in Hanoi, a few years before). Moreover, the first part is mainly a narrative, while the second one is partly made of reflections on life in exile. A third part, half the length of the other two, relates the vicissitudes of settling down in the Netherlands.

The narrative is not only composed contrary to chronology, it is far from covering what can be surmised as one or two decades of residence in Vietnam, in the 1960-1980s. Temporal landmarks are rare and very vague, the temporal thread extremely irregular, so that, be it memoirs or fiction, the narrative is typically discontinuous, with the consequence that it is difficult to grasp its logic. By presenting events in an apparent disorder, the narrator has chosen to erase the cause-and-effect logic inherent to chronology, the postulate that what follows is in some way the consequence of what happened before. There is no more cause and effect; there are isolated events, without logical links between them, which all depend on omnipotent, faraway and irrational forces. The protagonist cannot oppose those forces; he cannot even negotiate with them: exchanges are rare and deprived of any effort at conciliation. The protagonist finds himself in a Kafkaesque situation that no morals and no philosophy can make acceptable.

The third book, *Love, War and Illusions* (henceforth *Love*), is much shorter than the others (the 267-page text is printed in large characters with wide margins, maybe comprising only half of the text contained in the 292 pages of *Azalea*). The title suggests a fictional or even romantic theme; the subtitle (*Between Moscow and Hanoi*) introduces a realistic setting; the generic indication (“collection of memoirs-short stories”) confirms this double orientation; the author’s composite name (Asahan Alham Aidit) is mysterious. The cover is illustrated with a drawing of three Vietnamese soldiers, including a woman, beside an anti-aircraft battery, with two typically Russian buildings in the background. A preface by the publisher presents the book as sweet and sour memories of Asahan Alham Aidit, a student in the USSR and in Vietnam who



witnessed the severity of the “authoritarian” regimes prevailing in those two countries. A more detailed preface by the editor Harsutejo presents the author as the younger brother of DN Aidit and as a member of the Communist Party, exiled after 1965; a voluntary refugee in Vietnam where he “learned the revolution” and writing his memoirs with a sincerity that earned him much criticism. At the end of the book are biographical sketches of the author and the two editors, Harsutejo and H.D. Haryo Sasongko. Lastly, on the back cover, a message in English by A. Teeuw (a renowned Dutch professor) praises the literary talent of Asahan Alham, and a short ironic quotation of Pramoedya Ananta Toer (who had not read the book) brings the reader back to politics (“Someone bored with socialism—good, one side of man’s character is boredom”). The reader is thus amply advised: these “stories” (*cerpen*) are autobiographical.

The narrator talks in the first person; he uses the pronoun “*saya*”, like in *Alhamdulillah*. In Vietnam, in the second part of the book, the protagonist’s comrades call him Asahan and rarely Ai (abbreviation of Aidit). Thus, exceptionally, there is a nominal identity between author, narrator and protagonist.

The book is divided into two parts: “Studying in Lenin-Stalin’s country” (twelve stories) and “Wandering in the Vietnam war” (sixteen stories). The very first story evokes the protagonist’s departure from Jakarta with a group of students, on August 30, 1961, an eminently important date in the life of the narrator (the first sentence of the book is: “In one’s private life some years are difficult to forget.”). This narrative is therefore the immediate sequel to the period covered in the following novel, *Azalea*. As in *Alhamdulillah*, this book only shows very few traces of evident fiction and gives the impression of memories told with simplicity, without any historical pretention: we are dealing with an album of authentic anecdotes, not memoirs. It is clear that the author has not wished to write a fragment of autobiography: anybody who knows his biography can see that he has omitted elements that would have been present in an autobiography. However, the link between the stories is coherent enough for the book to give the impression of a monograph in 28 chapters rather than a collection of 28 stories. The author frequently refers to earlier events, related to his childhood in Belitung and his adolescence in Jakarta, as well as later events (e.g. his discovery of Solzhenitsyn when already settled in the Netherlands).

The narrative thread is chronological, but with some inconsistencies (e.g. he is a bachelor after being married) and a very irregular temporal thread (e.g. the last two stories are far in time from the preceding one and without any logical link to it). These memories involve a number of girls, students and others, but there is no amorous adventure. There is no friendship either, no other character than the narrator himself.

We find again the *War and Flowers* macho fantasies, implausibilities and elimination of women in the novel *Azalea*. The title is vaguely reminiscent of

*War and Flowers* (in both cases flowers refer to female protagonists), but in a cryptic way because the publisher suppressed the introductory poem that stood as a justification of the title! The sub-title (“Living in search of diplomas”) is a kind of private joke that the reader is not supposed to understand.<sup>9</sup> Diplomas are the last preoccupation of Sulai, but he wants to please his father; see this quote at the very end of the novel, when he is about to fly to Moscow: “I’ll try to realize my father’s ambition and obtain the university diploma he is dreaming about for me. This is probably the only thing I can do for his happiness and not out of my own desire.” (p. 291). By their respective connotations, title and sub-title suggest two different genres: one a novel, the other memories. The cover illustration is a drawing of a used sport shoe, the link of which with the contents of the book is impossible to guess! The book contains no preface and no biographical sketch that could orientate the reader. However, three quotes on the back cover introduce the notions of “memoirs, novel, history, fiction.”

The book is written in the first person (“aku”). The protagonist’s name is Sulaiman (abbreviated as Sulai). The book is signed “Hoofddorp, The Netherlands, 2001 – 2009,” which concerns the author, while the narrator situates himself much earlier, at the time he leaves Indonesia for the USSR, that is (but the reader does not know it), in 1961. The text starts with this sentence: “A few years back, when I was still in the second year of college, Maya, whom I had to call Miss Maya when she was teaching in front of the students, was to make a strong impression on my life.”

The book appears to be a mixing of intimate memories (the feelings of the protagonist and his relationship with his family) and love adventures; there is very little action between these two poles. Little by little the course of the narrative imposes the conviction that it is a novel, or at least that the part of fiction is important, considering the abundance of dialogues (perhaps a quarter or a third of the text), the number of love adventures (which are almost always absent from Indonesian memoirs), the number of implausibilities, and above all the absence of the fundamental elements of autobiographical texts: paucity of temporal landmarks, absence of personalities (the only two personalities are not named), insignificance of the protagonist at the national, historical or social level. A definite indication of the book being a novel is the fact that the narrator relates events he is not supposed to know, namely the very long dialogue between Mira and Octaviana (pp. 177-204), the quote from Mira’s private diary (pp. 72-73), and the mention of an activity of Octaviana unknown to Sulai (piano lessons, p. 195). We are thus in a novel in which episodes of a great factual banality but high psychological intensity may appear realistic, that is, autobiographical.

9. This sub-title is an allusion to the title of Ajip Rosidi’s memoirs, *Life without Diplomas* (*Hidup tanpa Ijazah*, Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 2008). (Pers. comm. from Asahan Alham, 20 April 2015).

The amorous adventures present several similarities with those of *War and Flowers*. All happen with girls of his age or slightly older, who are pretty and smart. It is often the women who take the initiative of the sexual relationship. The encounters are made possible by God (e.g. "I am convinced that what made me meet Mira is the Omnipotent, not chance. Chance is only a word used to avoid mentioning the one who organizes things and makes them happen," p. 39; see also pp. 256, 269). Aku is almost systematically in love and several times considers a life together. Afterwards, women are physically eliminated or degraded (rape, abortion, forced marriage, lethal accident). The relationship may last some time, but we only know it through incidental remarks later on in the narrative; only the first intercourse is described (in a few lines or a few words), which means that what matters is not the amorous relationship but its commencement.

Asahan Alham handles dialogues in a particular fashion: he does not use the universal formulas as "he answered; added my cousin; whispered Khadijah with a smile," which serve as indicators of who is speaking while suggesting the attitude and feelings of the interlocutors; he limits himself to simply quoting the utterances one after the other, as in a pure and simple transcription, and those dialogues are so well devised (whatever the quality of their contents) that there is rarely confusion about who pronounces this or that line. Thus, contrary to the usual dialogues in novels, there is here no intervention of the narrator.

The importance of dialogues here seems to underline the fact that the major theme of the book is the negotiation of relationships between the characters. Even more so as those dialogues are most often debates, particularly between Sulai and girls, as a prelude to amorous relations. The point is to convince, to win. The sexual act which results is evoked in one or a few lines, after pages and pages of (sometimes exhausting) dialogue. This is not only the effect of auto-censorship or natural prudery; it is the sign that conquest is more important than its fruits. The first aim of Sulai is neither to satisfy a sexual desire nor to have female partners, but to seduce.

The women relate to each other: Maya and Octaviana, who have been raped on the same occasion, become lovers; Octaviana and Mira become close friends, have a threesome experience with Sulai, and die together. A distinction has to be made between the three Jakarta women and the three from Belitung; the latter have a role in sexual adventures without great sentimental or intellectual implication. They are significant enough, however, to be degraded too. By its plot, the novel is quite audacious in the erotic domain, as not only does the protagonist have sexual relations with six different women at more or less the same time, but there is one threesome act and one between two women. However, the evocation of those erotic scenes is of the utmost discretion.

Aku is not shown as a libertine: he does not seek to multiply his amorous adventures as an obsessive seducer. With some schematization, God offers opportunities; women take the initiative; Sulai is always in love. These three

elements (God, women, love) exonerate Sulai from any suspicion of Don-Juanism and immorality. But still it may be in order to absolve him definitely of those suspicions that women are systematically eliminated. Contrary to *War and Flowers*, where elimination tends to be lethal, elimination in *Azalea* is rather a moral and social degradation. There are eight women in the narrative (six lovers plus the two sisters Irma and Joke); four are raped, four abort (one twice), three are sterile, two are killed in an accident, two are married against their will.

These adventures are too many and their ending too tragic not to orientate the reading of the book. The book is not only a novel, it is an unwonted, intriguing, even provocative one, that defies plausibility and common morality, a novel far away from realism, in which it is impossible to distinguish true from false. Romantic adventures occupy a part of the narrative only, maybe half of it; other characters act and talk, they are the narrator's father and brothers, plus others, but are they real or fictitious? What is the narrative link between those two apparently parallel worlds?

I have presented the four books in the (approximative) order of their writing, but it can be seen that the periods of their respective action succeed each other in a totally different order, so that, if one wants to restore chronology, the books should be read in the following order: *Azalea*, *Love*, *War and Flowers*, *Alhamdulillah*. The author never intended to write those four books as a series, and it is possible that he may publish another one in the future.<sup>10</sup>

I have paid attention to the elements of the books external to the text itself (the "paratext") that contribute to define the genre of the text and thus to determine the expectations of the reader. One does not read a book in the same way if it is labelled "novel" or "memoirs," and if it is entitled *War and Flowers* or *Self-portrait with Family* (such is the title of Sobron Aidit's last published book: *Potret Diri dan Keluarga*).

Asahan Alham himself, as an author, does not say he is writing memoirs or even memories. He publishes literary texts, the title or subtitle of which sometimes contains the word "*memoar*" and in which the narrator talks in the first person. He never addresses his readers. Through these books, in which he never intervenes directly, he addresses the Indonesian public in general, including the small number of his comrades in exile, including the other victims of the New Order, including the partisans of the New Order, and including—by far the most numerous—the young generation, for the majority totally ignorant of the historical question.

For that generation the books signed Asahan Alham, Asahan Aidit, and Asahan Alham Aidit may a priori be the works of different authors, just as the protagonists bearing the names of Salam (*War and Flowers*), Sulai (*Thank God*),

10. This information comes from Asahan Alham himself in personal communication.

Sulaiman (*Azalea*) and Asahan (*Love, War and Illusions*) are a priori different persons. For the greater number of them (which still is a small number!) the four books are probably read as books independent and of different status.

It is through external factors (the knowledge of Asahan Alham's biography) that the informed reader knows that it is the same author and the same protagonist, and guesses that the four books are in the same degree autofictional and that they complement each other. Let's go back to *War and Flowers*: the part of fiction is probably important (some love adventures, perhaps all of them, are fictitious; part of Salam's work in Haiphong is probably an invention) but the book deals with the same geographical and historical setting as the others, and there is in this "novel" a documentary material that usefully complements the "memoar" books. *War and Flowers* must therefore be regarded as a complement to the memoirs. A complement that has peculiarities: Asahan Alham for instance does not give vent to his political opinion (whereas he does so very bluntly in *Love* and above all in *Alhamdulillah*), but he says much more on Vietnam and about his love for the country.

Who is Asahan Alham then? He is the youngest of the five sons of Abdullah Aidit, a ranger (*mantri kehutanan*) on Belitung Island, in the Southeast of Sumatra, at the beginning of the 20th century. We know little of that father: born in 1901, he took part in the creation of the local branch of the association Nurul Islam, of the same orientation as the Muhammadiyah. In 1950, he became a member of the Parliament as a representative of the High Conference of the 1945 Generation.<sup>11</sup> Abdullah had two wives successively; the first three sons (Ahmad, Basri and Murad) are children of the first wife, the two others (Sobron and Asahan) children of the second. The latter already had two children from a previous marriage, Rosiah and Mohammad Thaib, who were educated by Abdullah together with his own sons.

Asahan was born in December 1938 in Tanjungpandan (Belitung), where he spent his childhood. At the age of 12 years, in 1950, he accompanied his father, who was settling temporarily in Jakarta in order to fulfill his function as a member of the People's Representative Council (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat). He did his studies at the college of the Taman Siswa and then in a senior high school (SMA). As early as age 14, he had a few poems published in journals of the capital. At the end of high school, he registered at the Russian Department of the Faculty of Letters of Universitas Indonesia (that choice of the Russian language is nowhere explained), but as soon as 1961 he went to study in Moscow thanks to a fellowship from Lumumba University. He obtained a Master of Humanities five years later, in 1966, from Lomonosov University. He thus was in Moscow when the September 30, 1965, putsch occurred.

What the above-mentioned biographical sketch does not say, is that, at the end

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11. Musyawarah Besar Angkatan 45, MBA45. See Sobron Aidit, *Gajah di Pelupuk Mata*, p. 116.

of 1966, when his brother DN Aidit had been assassinated and he himself could not go back to Indonesia, lest to be imprisoned, tortured, or deported, he chose not to return, saw his passport confiscated, and thus found himself, together with several hundred comrades in misfortune, stateless in a situation of exile.

He chose not to stay in the USSR and not to move to China either, in spite of the injunction from the “Delegation,”<sup>12</sup> but to go to Vietnam, whereto he was brought in December 1966. There, together with several dozen comrades, he followed military and ideological instruction for a few years, under the authority of the local Communist Party and the Delegation. It is only much later, in 1974, that he was posted to the university and, as the biographical sketch says, wrote a dissertation on the comparison between Nusantaraian and Vietnamese proverbs. He spent several more years in Vietnam, without work or occupation, but with the impossibility to leave the country. It was only in 1984 that he could go to the Netherlands, where, after some judicial tribulations, he obtained the status of refugee, then the right to have his wife and son join him, and finally naturalization, and where he still lives today.

In the light of this new information, the situation of Asahan, Salam and Sulai in Vietnam appears different, and so does the reading of the three books set in Vietnam. The four books constitute a series of memories, an autobiography of some sort, delivered in disorder, mixed with fiction, including inconsistencies, repetitions and even more lacunae.

Asahan Alham is not the only Indonesian exile who has told of his experiences. There is actually a very high number of autobiographical texts written by exiles, about 42, which is much more than those produced by the political prisoners (*tapol*)<sup>13</sup> of the New Order, even though the *tapol* were far more numerous. There are various reasons for this. Asahan Alham is not the only one among the exiles to define his writings as memoirs mixed with fiction: Ibarruri Putri Alam (his own niece) entitled her autobiography “roman biografis,”<sup>14</sup> while Sobron Aidit (his own brother) labelled his books “stories, short stories, memoirs, memoirs-stories” (*kisah, cerita, cerpen, memoar, cerpen memoar, kisah memoar*), but in fact both Ibarruri and Sobron did intend to write the most authentic stories of their experiences, and Asahan is the only one who does utilize fiction for his own ends.

12. In February 1966, a Delegation of the Central Committee of the PKI (Delegasi CC PKI) was constituted in Beijing; it claimed to act in the name of the Party and thus to have authority on all Party members abroad; it summoned them to gather in China.

13. As the acronym of *tahanan politik* (political prisoners), the word *tapol* has come to specifically designate all people jailed by the New Order, most of them without any kind of legal procedure, as suspected to have been involved in the putsch of September 1965. Most of them were detained in gaols throughout the country; 12.000 were banished to the island of Buru in the Maluku archipelago.

14. See Alam in the bibliography.



The exiles, just like the *ex-tapol*, write an alternative history, in order to balance the official history produced by the New Order. That official history is extremely ponderous: throughout thirty years, by means of the most varied media (publications, school handbooks, seminars, films, museums, monuments, speeches, national festivals), it has imposed a version of events which is deeply engraved in Indonesia's collective consciousness. The alternative discourse, so far, is infinitely weaker as it does not (yet) have access to the most efficient media. Moreover, it is often modest or even shy: several memoirs of exile or *tapol* writers have initially been written for the sake of the author's family only (e.g. the memoirs of N. Syam H., Ali Chanafiah, Umar Said, Hasan Raid). When they formulate their motivations, the exiles and the *tapol* often explain that they write so that such events never happen again, that the experience of the victims be known, that the voice of the weak be heard.

Asahan Alham stands outside that tendency: he does not want to produce an alternative discourse; he does not want to rewrite history; he does not even want to write the history of the exiles. In *Love*, talking about his situation in Moscow at the end of 1966, when DN Aidit already had been assassinated and the Soviet government did not know what to do with an embarrassing brother, he writes: "But this is a matter of past history, which I cannot expose in detail here. I'm going straight to my own story" (p. 130). And about his visit to the (just liberated) town of Nha Trang: "Once again, I am not a journalist, even less a war journalist. I have my own story, which has not much to do with war and peace." (p. 215).

Exile authors face constraints inherent to their status that radically differentiate their production from that of the *tapol*. Those constraints are the duty of secrecy and auto-censorship on their past and present political opinions. Here again Asahan Alham is an exception: he respects secrecy, but he bluntly expresses his opinions. The obligation of secrecy does probably not bother him much, as he does not wish to describe the political situation. About his years in Jakarta which he evokes in *Azalea* with the hindsight of more than fifty years, he does not describe the political situation either: beyond the real persons there are a few allusions to the regime and a few reflections to the national character, but physical, political or social evocations of the country are extremely rare: the setting could almost be another country. As for political opinions, they regard socialism; we will return to it.

Asahan Alham also differs from the exiles on another fundamental point: the exiles write firstly with the aim to recover their Indonesian identity; they have been excluded, they want to go back home and be recognized as citizens again. There is no such thing with Asahan Alham: no claim of identity, no need for recognition. He does not write in order to be acknowledged and accepted by any audience whatsoever; he writes in order to say, to himself as much as to others, who he is



in reality and in imagination, to tell about himself, but also to discover himself, invent himself, to give Asahan the possibility of living the lives that have not been offered to him. It is in *Alhamdulillah* that he has most precisely formulated his conception of autobiography, but it is at the basis of all his writings.

At the start there is a man anxious, vulnerable, conscious of his fragility, wishing to fathom his own being by talking about himself.

I realize how fragile I am as a man, easily damaged, easily destroyed, easily eliminated, easily shattered, easily pulverized, easily humiliated, easily degraded, easily discarded, easily kicked out, easily thrown away. (...) I want to see myself in what I think, I fantasize, I perpetuate, something—because I am writing—that I may not find in one attempt, I may have to write again and again, all my life perhaps, until I do or do not find it. This is important to me as I am racing against time before my fragile self dissolves entirely. I still wish to see myself, who I am, not only the feeling of becoming me. (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 163).

There is also the consciousness that no autobiographical endeavour can reach absolute authenticity. Every autobiography is a reconstruction of past life, informed and distorted by the present. It is as much an act of imagination as an act of recollection. Whatever the author's sincerity and goodwill he will never reach reality.

No autobiography will ever be free of fiction and imagination. Whatever the effort of a biographer or an autobiographer to write down authentic facts and information, he will not free himself more than seventy per cent of fiction and imagination. There is no biography or autobiography which is a hundred per cent free of those elements. (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 221).

Beyond these considerations on the nature of reality and the (im)possibility to reconstruct it, Asahan Alham's true preoccupation is not to catch past reality in its exactitude and its integrity but, on the contrary, to escape it. The reality of facts is constituted by what authorities have imposed on the individual; the reality of the individual is to be found beyond those constraints. Hence the project to rewrite the reality of facts in disregard of those constraints.

Every human life is a film with two scenarios: by oneself and by others. Two thirds of my life have been following the scenario of others with various kinds of cooperation: voluntary, half voluntary, forced, half forced, unconscious, stupid, naive, ignorant, and a mix of adventurism and conviction. I want to complete this two-third-scenario by others with a scenario of my own at an age that is close to half a century, with new adventures at my own cost, not that of a government or a political party. (*Alhamdulillah*, pp. 10-11).

And further in the same novel:

I am the one writing, so I am the one who decides the fate of all my protagonists and other actors. I describe the life I see, then I depict it anew according to my thought and my imagination. I don't want to be dictated by anything, including life, even the most realistic life. Destiny never gave me the life I would have wished, so I now decide myself what I think, I wish, I fantasize. It is life's right to give me whatever it wishes, and it is my right to wish for the life I dream of. The struggle is with me, it is my own, on my own name and on my own responsibility. (*Alhamdulillah*, pp. 162-3).

Fiction has the effect of a mask: it allows outrageous sincerity and indiscretion. But fiction here has another source. Asahan Alham is to be taken

literally: he invents his life, he exploits the autobiographical genre to invent himself, and he does it in a whimsical, flippant, even anarchic way: he does not write an ideal autobiography either, the life he could have had. He confides himself in his books with more sincerity and intimacy than most, perhaps than all other Indonesian authors, but he vandalizes his own writings, he denatures them, maybe partly in order to create confusion, but also to inscribe in writing the impossibility to write.

There are a few possible ways to read Asahan Alham. I have mentioned that of the reader ignorant of the political context, who reads his books as pure fiction, and on the opposite, that of the informed reader, who discards fiction in order to isolate the authentic testimony. But not to read the testimony or to read it alone is reading too little or too much, it is neglecting the work's integrality which is constructed as an autofiction.

It happens that Asahan Alham has been writing (between 1983 and 2009) during a period when self-writing has been the object of an important work of analysis and theorization, when people questioned the relationship between reality and fiction in autobiographical writings. This is the period when appeared the new concept of "autofiction". The term was created by a French novelist, Serge Doubrovsky, about one of his own novels, in 1977. The term was then summarily defined as "fiction of strictly real facts and events". The idea was a success; the word was adopted in several other languages, and the concept gave rise to many articles, books, dissertations and colloquiums—wherefrom new definitions were conceived. Vincent Colonna for instance sees in autofiction an "fictionalization of the self", in the sense that the writer invents a life for himself. His definition of autofiction is: "A literary work through which an author invents a personality and an existence for himself while keeping his real identity".<sup>15</sup> The various writers who intervened on the subject gave divergent definitions, but they agree on attaching to the definition of autofiction the nominal identity between author and protagonist. This excludes Asahan Alham as, among his protagonists, only the one in *Love* (the least fictitious of his books) bears the name Asahan. It does not matter basically whether Asahan Alham's books are defined as autofiction or fictional autobiography, the reflection on autofiction regards them all the same. In a recent contribution, Doubrovsky has exposed that the "modern" autobiographical genre (the texts he quotes are posterior to World War II) are radically different from the "classical" genre for the reason that the subject has changed: "I think that what has changed nowadays is the conception of the relationship with oneself. (...) People do not feel their life as in former times". For authors like Alain Robbe-Grillet, Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, George Perec, or Doubrovsky himself, it is impossible to grasp one's life in its entirety, to recapitulate a coherent path, to catch the essence of a life and to

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15. Colonna, "L'Autofiction".

reconstruct its history in a logical fashion. And he concludes: “autofiction is the post-modern form of autobiography”.<sup>16</sup>

Asahan Alham certainly does not express himself in those terms, but the idea that life is not a continuous flow leading logically, inescapably, from an origin towards an outcome, that is, fundamentally, the negation of the teleological structure of traditional autobiography, is not foreign to him.

Fiction is much more present in the first and the last books (*War and Flowers*, *Azalea*) than in the second (*Alhamdulillah*), and it is almost absent from the third (*Love*). But this regards evident fiction, not the more subtle or indistinct inventions that are difficult or even impossible to detect. It is impossible to analyze that fiction because it is impossible to inventorise it: many inventions or distortions escape us. Let's just say that fiction proceeds by invention and deformation, and that it affects principally the main protagonist, but also secondary characters. This means that the author does not restrict himself to invent episodes (characters and their actions), which after all is the nature of the novel, but he distorts a reality that in his case has a historical dimension as the relevant characters are known nationwide.

In both *Alhamdulillah* (p. 293) and *Azalea* (p. 159) for instance, he asserts that his father had four wives successively, each one being married after the death of the preceding one, and that he himself and Sobron were born from the fourth. This is a distortion: his father had two wives only, as is said in *War and Flowers* (p. 155).<sup>17</sup> Why invent on so futile a point and in a domain that somehow belongs to history? The answer is: for the sake of inventing, in order to control reality, to assert the creative power of the writer.

It follows that the reader can only believe the information delivered in those texts if it is confirmed by other sources: the father had five sons from two different wives, yes, it is correct. But did he really sell to the PKI, for a derisory price, around 1960, three houses that he owned in Jakarta (*Azalea*, pp. 211, 233, 234, 251)? Did he really own rice fields in Pulo Gadung that he leased, to the annoyance of DN Aidit, who did not like that his father should be a landowner (*Azalea*, pp. 54, 60, 159-160)?

Fiction casts a doubt on the veracity of all information. In that way, it offers a kind of impunity: the narrator can allow himself the most indiscreet confidences as they may be fictitious. He does indeed allow himself (although rarely) to reveal family secrets which would probably not have appeared in a book presented as an authentic document. The fact for example that DN Aidit had frequent quarrels with his wife, wherein she got the better of him and from which he once even ended up with a black eye (*Azalea*, pp. 174-5, 177, 214).

16. Doubrovsky, “Les points sur les ‘i’”.

17. And in various books by his brothers Murad and Sobron; see e.g. Murad Aidit, *Aidit Sang Legenda*, pp. 37-39.

Confidence has its limits though. The desire for introspection is at every step restrained by modesty. About a painful episode, which many other authors (and readers) would deem eminently worthy of being related, namely the fact that, in Vietnam, he happened to be quartered in such precarious conditions and been given so little money, that he and his family (his wife and his five year old son) suffered from hunger, the narrator of *Love* refuses to describe this: "Listing all the miseries of my life would be a waste of paper, absolutely useless, no one wants to hear that." (*Cinta*, p. 262).<sup>18</sup>

The narrator of the four novels allows himself some confidences on his state of mind, his psychological evolution, his thoughts and emotions, but he is permanently reserved on his intimate life. He relates, with a freedom that probably will appear audacious or even provocative to certain Indonesian readers, his amorous adventures with about ten women in *War and Flowers*, four others in *Alhamdulillah*, and eight others in *Azalea*, but he does not say a word of the real love life of the author. In *War and Flowers* the narrator tells of marrying Kim; he describes their wedding and their honeymoon. During the period covered by the novel, Asahan Alham has married a Vietnamese woman, allusions to whom are found in *Love* and above all in *Alhamdulillah*, but it is almost certain that it is not his real wedding that is described: the latter is beyond limits.

Another domain that modesty keeps beyond limits is religion. In three very succinct allusions in *Alhamdulillah* (p. 91) and *Azalea* (pp. 23, 157) the narrator declares he has stepped away from religion since he left his birth island of Belitung ("I have not been praying for eight years," *Azalea*, p. 25). He dwells on the subject nowhere else. This shyness about love and religious life is not peculiar to Asahan Alham: it is common to Indonesian autobiographies as a whole.<sup>19</sup>

At the two poles of the fiction-reality axis in Asahan Alham's four books, amorous adventures on the one hand and information about the author's family on the other can be differentiated from the introspective discourse that, on the psychological and political levels, evokes the psychic and intellectual evolution of the protagonist. In order to follow that evolution, one has to read the novels in an order different from that of their writing, without ignoring however that the introspective tendency is stronger in the last one, that relating to the teenage period, *Azalea*.

During the five years covered by the book (approximately 1955-1961) the protagonist, Sulai, lives at his elder brother's house. There are in Asahan Alham's four books a series of anecdotes staging Ahmad, alias DN Aidit, which, without ever naming him, sets a praiseful and affectionate portrait of

18. There is, however, a strong page on hunger in another book: *Alhamdulillah*, p. 12.

19. See Watson, *Of Self and Nation*, pp. 109-112.

him. Ahmad and Asahan were respectively the eldest and youngest among the Aidit brothers, with an age difference of fifteen years. In *Azalea*, DN Aidit is systematically called “my elder brother” (*abang sulungku*), and as the other family members are not named either, but designated by kinship links, this produces formulas like: “My elder brother from the same mother and another father came from Banjarmasin to pay a family visit to the house of my elder brother from the same father and another mother” (p. 169); in other words, Thaib paid a visit to Ahmad. The “elder brother” is the head of the political party Pelopor. He accommodates Sulai (who however pays rent thanks to pocket money sent by the father) and provides him with a job (Sulai is responsible for the Party’s library, some 5,000 books, kept in the elder brother’s study) for which he receives a salary. This situation is the source of long evenings spent together, when the elder brother works and Sulai changes one record for another, as the elder brother likes to work while listening to classical music, among others the Symphony no. 3 of “Comrade Beethoven.”<sup>20</sup> The elder brother behaves in a fraternal, patient and tolerant way, but he blames Sulai for his lack of maturity, his frivolity and his absence of political commitment.

Another brother, Sobron, the fourth in the family, only four years older than Asahan, was in Jakarta during the same period and he figures in the novel too, occasionally designated as “my youngest elder brother” (*“abangku yang termuda”*) but more generally as “my elder brother at Cikini Raya” (*“Abangku yang di Cikini Raya”*), which is an approximation for Oud Gondangdia Binnen, a street in the same area, where Sobron lived and where Sulai used to go (says the novel) to practice violin several hours every day. Sobron evokes this period in the second part of the collection *Self-portrait with Family*. It is not the place here for comparing the autobiographical writings of the two brothers; let’s just say that they could not be more different. Sobron’s “stories” (hundreds of them) are far from being precise and systematic narratives, but they are resolutely in the field of authenticity. Sobron himself writes in the preface:

Perhaps this is one weakness of my writing, the fact that I always write what I live, what I see, what I feel. Of all I have written until now, not more than five per cent was I able to write according to imagination. Almost all of it is truly what happened to me and my family. (*Self-portrait with Family*, p. v)

Thus the two brothers evoke their respective situations during the same years, even though they only talk very little of each other. The contrast between these two self-portraits is striking: on one side the frivolous, hedonist, lazy, selfish and materially easy life of Sulai; on the other the laborious and fully committed life of Sobron: he has been working several hours a day since childhood, then supporting himself entirely since high school, has dived into

20. “Kawan Beethoven,” *Alhamdulillah*, p. 295.

studies (SMP, SMA, Taman Siswa) with passion and perseverance, and is involved in all sorts of collective activities.

Such a comparison, as well as the identification of DN Aidit and Sobron in Asahan Alham's books, take us back to the reality, or at least what can be perceived as the reality, of those intense years. But that is contrary to the essence of the novels. Asahan Alham has dissimulated the name of the PKI under that of Partai Pelopor and those of his two brothers under terms of kinship because he does not want to write a historical novel and certainly not the novel of DN Aidit. He does not want his book to be a documentary source on the PKI, its head, or Indonesia in the 1950s.

Sulai, in *Azalea*, is an adolescent proud of his talents (he gives violin concerts, takes part in swimming competitions, has poems published in literary journals) and his good looks (women cannot resist him), but fundamentally anxious about his own personality. He has no desire for the future, no ambition; he defines himself negatively only against the ambitions other people have for him. He wishes to be freed from the few authorities and constraints that still weigh upon him, but he has no purpose by himself. To one of his lovers he declares: "My plan is to thwart all plans. To have no aspiration..." (p. 147), and to another he asks: "According to you, who am I?" (p. 281). He is not attracted to associative activities and he refuses any commitment and any authority:

For me, to be a member of an organization is like being a voluntary slave. Organizations have high and low castes, so that people don't have the same rank. (...) I am a free man who will never voluntarily become the slave of castes if not under duress, as it is very difficult to escape the oppression of castes in this world. My eldest brother himself claims that he aims to eradicate all castes in the world, but I see that in his own organization he builds the most rigid castes. (p. 53)

He refuses constraints out of principle, with a certain consistency: he has one passion only, that of the violin, but even in that domain he refuses to let himself be entrapped: "I don't want to be dependent on music; music has to depend on me." (p. 246)

However, he refuses the political commitment that his brother demands of him without being able to oppose any reason, simply by lack of taste and ideal, by lack of reflection and imagination. There is in the whole novel no serious reflection, neither on the political situation in Indonesia at that crucial moment of Soekarno's last years, nor on the ideology his brother is offering him. To the effect that he remains mute before that brother, while suffering from that inferiority:

My elder brother was a brilliant athlete in his young age. He trained in everything, in order to build muscles and all his body, but his favourite sport was boxing. He didn't punch his brother with his fists though. Only with words. Leaving a trauma in the chest. (p. 214)

Sulai experiences moments of happiness, of "paradise." For instance on a blissful day in Belitung he exclaims:



I think this life is beautiful. I don't know how long it will last, but paradise does materialize in this coarse world, even if ephemerally. At least I did experience it, I do now experience it. This is my present day and my present paradise. My elder brother wants to create a paradise as permanent as possible for his labourers, in this world, this coarse world, and not in that distant world he doesn't believe in anymore. Let him do it, and let me be. (p. 270)

But he also knows dismay and a feeling of vacuity: on a less happy day, while he is destabilized by dramatic recent events (Maya's marriage, Mira's and Octaviana's death) he is much less optimistic:

The situation changes ever so quickly, my life also has seen drastic alterations. I feel so isolated, so lonely, and as if I had lost all motivation. I ask myself whether I ever had any. I do everything I wish to do with enthusiasm, with passion, but do I have a motivation? I don't think a lot about the aim of life, I am more heading to a life without aim. (p. 209)

In that context of vacuity women represent repeated successes (conquests), but also the same amount of failures: Sulai is unable to save a single one from death or degradation; no one will reach the stage of the providential (matrimonial) union, which would mean a choice, a commitment and the passing over to adulthood. Those women are imaginary; they are part of the fiction aimed at balancing the emptiness and the dependance that Sulai feels in his private life. But the most important fiction of the novel is not in that invention, but in a distortion. Sulai resists until the end to the pressure of his brother. He applies to a fellowship at Lumumba University in Moscow, even though he knows his brother wants him to stay in Indonesia and become a cadre of the revolution. "But why did I still apply? Maybe I was afraid to be forced to take part in the revolution, so that if there was a possibility to flee abroad as a student, I might escape it." (p. 209)

At that time he is still not a member of the Party: "I was feeling more and more like a foreigner in my elder brother's house. I was not a member of the Party yet. One day, my brother would certainly make that demand on me for being allowed to stay in his house" (p. 211). His brother does not intervene, even though he disagrees; Sulai obtains the fellowship and leaves for Moscow, liberated: he is free of his brother's authority, he is not a member of the Party, he is totally independent.

This is Sulai's reality. But in Asahan Alham's reality he has given in and has become a member of the Party as soon as 1958. In a message posted on a website on April 27, 2010, he writes: "My relationship between me as a younger brother and my elder brother as head of the PKI was a Party relationship. I joined the Party at the age of 18."<sup>21</sup> He has also stated his belonging to the Party at the time he is excluded from it in *Alhamdulillah* (pp. 274, 287, 298), e.g. "I joined the Party and was excluded from it in Vietnam because

21. <http://sastra-pembebasan.10929.n7.nabble.com/sastra-pembebasan-Fw-E-mail-met-bijlage-attachment-Roman-Cinta-dan-Politik-td39783.html>.



I was supposed to have violated the discipline of the Party” (p. 274). In private correspondence he explains:

In 1956 I joined Pemuda Rakyat and the same year I was sworn in as a candidate to become a Party member. Then in 1958 I was accepted as a full Party member after a trial period of two years. My organization base was in Kampung Galur [Jakarta], where I lived with my elder brother. I joined the Party following my own political conviction of the time but of course there was some pressure from my brother. But the decisive factor was myself. (E-mail, 21/07/15).

Thanks to fiction Sulai has literally liberated himself from Asahan Alham’s adhesion to the Party. This reminds us that fiction invades all fields of the narrative. It is therefore possible that Sulai’s statements about his opinions, feelings and emotions are partially fictitious too.

Life in Moscow during five and a half years (middle of 1961 to end of 1966) is only evoked in the collection *Love*, that is, the volume in which fiction as well as introspection are minimal. The first part of the book relates several episodes of life in the USSR. As a foreign student, the protagonist, who is here named Asahan, receives an extremely comfortable stipend. He lives a dream life: he goes to concerts, operas, plays, follows violin courses at the conservatory, benefits of everything and works moderately. There are in those pages no debate of ideas, no reflection of any kind.

*Love* does not relate the way the 1965-1966 events were perceived and lived through in Moscow, nor the fact that Asahan’s passport was cancelled, nor the creation of representative organs of the PKI in Moscow and Beijing.<sup>22</sup> Here too Asahan Alham does not write the history of the period, and the absence of any information on the events does not allow the ignorant reader to understand what is happening to the protagonist. Most of the Indonesian refugees in the USSR move to China. Asahan, who is embarrassing for the Soviet government as a brother of DN Aidit, cannot go back to Indonesia and cannot stay where he is. As soon as his University diploma is obtained, at the end of 1966, he asks to go to Vietnam (this choice is not explained); he is transported there together with a few dozen comrades selected by the Delegation.

They spend a few weeks in Beijing, where they go through sessions of indoctrination and have a quick sight of the Cultural Revolution. This stay in China may be fictitious, but in that case it is inspired by another stay.<sup>23</sup> As a whole, he only had a superficial view of the country, but which left him with a very negative impression. He notices the peasants’ misery, the extravagant

22. On the situation of the Indonesians living in the USSR at the time, see Hill’s and Supartono’s articles, and the memoirs of Ibarruri Putri Alam, Waloejo Sedjati, Koesalah Soebagyo Toer, and Waruno Mahdi in the bibliography published in the same issue.

23. Asahan Alham in private correspondence says he has visited China twice: in 1965 for one month and in 1972 for six months, as told in *War and Flowers*.

luxury of official receptions, the violence of the Cultural Revolution and the overwhelming omnipresence of the political propaganda. His loathing of communism seems already total: "Stalin killed communists, including his own colleagues, up to millions. Chairman Mao was not inferior to Stalin as the great master and at the same time the great enemy of communism, who killed dozens of millions of people during his reign..." (*Love*, p. 127).

The sojourn in Vietnam, where he arrives in December 1966, is evoked in very different ways in the three books *War and Flowers*, *Love* and *Alhamdulillah*. He and his group are in Vietnam in order to "learn revolution!" (*Love*, p. 136). The reader will not know much more. Immediately after their arrival, they undergo a rain of bombs and realize that the Vietnamese are settled in war with a remarkable placidity: everyday life seems perfectly normal, only interrupted by ceaseless alerts. The protagonist (whose name is Salam, Asahan or Sulai according to the books) will have very often to experience air threats and thus fear and the necessity to rush to a shelter, but he will never be involved in the war. He evokes bombs a few times however with a cynicism that conceals compassion and horror:

It transpires that in war man still thinks of beauty, he chooses esthetic moments, like the pilots of the American bombers who elected crowded markets to drop those fragmentation bombs, and they regarded as beautiful the instant when the master bomb landed on the ground without a sound, then suddenly produced hundreds of small bombs which exploded, propelling tiny nails which penetrated human flesh, up to hundreds in one body. This was all the product of a beautiful culture according to its creators and disseminators. The war of nerves is an art of war with its new inventions like fragmentation bombs and the like. (*Love*, p. 154)<sup>24</sup>

He is ironic about his own situation: "... we the tourists from Moscow and Beijing," "we the picnic soldiers", "I was just a spectator. Watching people making war" (*Love*, pp. 174, 210, 237). He is an adventurer rather than a true Marxist; has he ever been a Marxist anyway?

It is clear from everything I describe about Hanoi that there was not the slightest trace of Marxism, and I deserve to be called a nominal Marxist, a nominal patriot, a nominal Muslim, a nominal nationalist, and everything that is nominal, all of this perhaps being the result of the actions of my elder brothers who were nominal brothers to me. I was a dissident in my own family.<sup>25</sup>

The sojourn in Vietnam will last almost eighteen years (1966-1984). During the first years, he and his group are posted to various centres of military and ideological training. They have very little contact with the local population. Aku is very skeptical and disillusioned regarding the utility of

24. See also one page on fragmentation bombs in *War and Flowers*, pp. 185-186, and the description of a district of Hanoi pulverized by bombs in December 1972, in *Love*, pp. 237-238.

25. *Alhamdulillah*, p. 179; the word translated as "nominal" is "*abangan*" in the original; hence the pun "*para abang abangan*".

their instruction. The idea of bringing revolution to Indonesia is for him an “illusion” (*Love*, p. 248). He is saturated with indoctrination and sessions of auto-criticism: “But all this is gone for me, or for the time being I am free of the overdose of the anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism, anti-bourgeoisie, and anti-modern revisionism political vaccine which I was inoculated with during those four years.” (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 209)

As soon as 1969 he notifies his wish to move abroad. It may be at this time that he is excluded from the Party; this is certainly the conclusion of painful conflicts; he states nevertheless: “I am proud to have been kicked out from the PKI” (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 298). His condemnation of communism is radical: “The dictatorship of the proletariat is indeed an appropriate political term in the real sense of the words: a dictatorship meant to oppress the proletariat and the non-proletariat as well in the name of the proletariat.” (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 198)

He is first isolated from the group then ordered to study at the university, and finally is posted to the navy in Haiphong, where he spends about one and a half years. It is during this sojourn that he has a (probably fictitious) conversation with a young foreign (Bulgarian) woman, to whom he confides a dismay that is much more than a political step back:

I am dependant on something I fear. The fear of being wrong, being cursed, being labelled, and then only doing the most common, the cliché. I force myself to listen to the bombs and to look at the flesh torn to pieces before I am myself ripped up by shrapnel which doesn't look at who is wrong and who is right. Now I can't go forward or backward. And I have no intention to retreat. Even though by staying where I am I will lose everything without leaving any trace or any remains behind. (*War and Flowers*, pp. 285-286)

After Haiphong he is once again settled in Hanoi, without work, then in mid-1974 ordered to resume his studies; that is when he works on a dissertation about Southeast Asian proverbs (and that is also when he gets married). Food is lacking; he and his family suffer from hunger: “The war I am facing now is a war against the hunger and the poverty into which I have fallen. The Party organization is dissolved; the heads have been thrown out by Vietnam on the motive of being regarded as Maoist and oriented toward Beijing” (*Love*, p. 265-266). He defends his dissertation in 1977. The last lines of *Love* (around 1980) are:

My revolution school was crushed to pieces, destroyed by its own teachers, who fled helter-skelter in search of their individual destinies. Everyone was only thinking of his own future and looking for his own way. I was left all by myself, shouting ‘Don't leave me!’ in the midst of a political desert and the desert of poverty. My wife inherited that trauma and gave birth to a child who not only would carry on the trauma of his parents but who was himself a trauma incarnate. (*Love*, p. 266-267)

According to *Alhamdulillah* he is transferred to Nha Trang, without work, without occupation, but at least freed from hunger, while waiting for a problematic departure to a foreign country. Authorities are opposed to his departure because he is regarded as a Maoist at a time when relations between Vietnam and China

have degraded. “Almost like, or maybe like, in my own country: *ideology is a transmitted disease*” (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 25). He eventually leaves Vietnam in mysterious circumstances. Settling in the Netherlands, as told in *Alhamdulillah*, is an epilogue that signals the end and the failure of political illusions:

Dozens of years afterwards, in his old age, everyone is only busy with his trolley at the supermarket, while his grandchildren are cut off from the dreams of their grandfather and grandmother. An illusion is truly sweet; having to discard it is truly bitter. (*Love*, p. 249)

There is a certain gradation in the process of writing. While he still is in Vietnam as a prisoner of a political situation, the outcome of which is unpredictable, Asahan Alham writes a novel about his experience. It is *War and Flowers*. He relates what he is living through together with previous memories, he expresses opinions and feelings, and he adds many fictitious episodes. He talks about himself on two levels: realistic and fictitious, but he does not know yet that he has started writing his autobiography. A few years later, when settled in the Netherlands, he writes a much more realistic text (he reveals more actual experiences and political opinions) which, for that reason perhaps, is literarily more elaborated. It is *Alhamdulillah*. The third book, *Love, War and Illusions*, is a collection of stories that may have been written more or less independently from each other and which are the least reflective among his writings. Then comes *Azalea*, the gestation of which seems to have been very long (it is dated “2001-2009”). The author is 70 years old when he finishes the book; his Jakarta years as a teenager are very far back in the past; he looks at the boy he once was and at his eldest brother, who had a crucial role in determining the course of his whole life, with the hindsight of an old man who had spent more than fifty years in exile. He can dig into his own mind without reserve now—it is the most introspective of his books—but he can also play with the past, give it a lesson so to speak.

Asahan Alham has introduced fiction into all levels of his texts: his experiences, the external milieu (his family), his feelings and opinions, in other words his biography, the social context and his own introspection. Does this mean that he is not, in fact, writing his autobiography, but a psychological novel about a fictitious character to whom he has lent some of his own features? No, he is at the center of all his writings, he is the main if not the single subject of his “memoirs-stories,” he constantly writes his autobiography, but wearing a mask, dressed up, rigged out in factitious experiences, ideas and feelings. That autobiography is probably the most introspective among its kind in Indonesia and it records not only the factual and authentic experience of the author, but also the imaginary and fantastic world within him.

Introspection of a man that fate placed in a unique situation: to refuse any political involvement when one is the brother of the head of a revolutionary party:

If only I had not had an older brother, perhaps I would never have anything to do with the revolution, either to talk about it or to make it for good. How tedious, how nauseating is this life. History cannot be repaired. (*Alhamdulillah*, p. 231)

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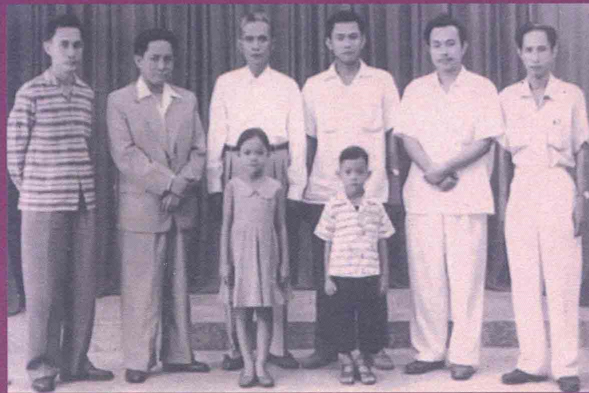
ALHAMDULILLAH



**ASAHAN AIDIT**

**Roman Memoar**

**ALHAMDULILLAH**



Dari kiri ke kanan:  
Murad Aidit  
DN Aidit  
Abdullah Aidit (alm)  
Asahan Aidit  
Sobron Aidit  
Basri Aidit (Alm)  
Yang terkecil:  
Putri dan putra DN Aidit

